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Free WiFi at Boise facility lets veterans stay connected

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With the air of a mad scientist verging on a discovery, Robert Mann dashes through an Idaho Veterans Home hallway and pokes his head into a conference room.

The 64-year-old pulls a laptop computer toward the room. He's doing something no other resident has yet done.

Mann, known to most as Bobby, is searching for a good wireless Internet signal. The veterans home off Fort Street recently built a wireless network. Bobby, who has a laptop, is his first test case. Administrators plan to expand the network for more residents and staff to use soon, said Steve Monroe, senior IT information systems technician.

After a stroke in March, Bobby lost his ability to speak and read. He's had to start all over again during the past eight months. But if you see him walk with gusto and feverishly talk about the value of the Internet, you'd almost never guess.

"I can read! I can read everything!" he said elatedly in his Brooklyn accent, pointing at the magenta and neon yellow screen (personal settings) of his laptop. "Here's the New York Times. Bam! So, here's the Internet. Now, look, I can read everthing now. It's wonderful."

For two weeks, Bobby has been using the computer to practice reading out loud and researching. He taps into Dogpile to search, WebMD to look up information on strokes and www.intrepidmuseum.org to check out more information about a ship he worked on while serving in the U.S. Navy in the late 1950s and early '60s.

The online practice revved him up to read his first novel since the stroke — "It Doesn't Take a Hero," an autobiography by General H. Norman Schwarzkopf.

Another good thing about WiFi access for Bobby and other veterans living on fixed incomes: It's free. They don't have to subscribe to an online program or pay to set up a land line, like one veteran in the home has. All they need is a computer with wireless capability.

"What better way to encourage learning and just challenging your brain and keeping it healthy and active?" said Oni Kinberg, Bobby's social worker. "He's just so excited about it ... He shakes my hand every time he sees me and says 'Thank you, thank you.' "

Kinberg says the wireless Internet has given Bobby more independence. There has not been wide access to the Internet at the home for veterans, and residents have to share newspapers and other publications. With his laptop, Bobby doesn't have to wait in line or be limited to the subscriptions the home gets.

The network also will help more staff people get out of their offices and take notes and log information among residents, said Kinberg.

Enlarge



1110 local 2 veteran.tifKatherine Jones / The Idah

Wireless Internet service has totally impressed veteran Bobby Mann, who now has access to anything he wants — free of cords and Internet and phone charges — at the Idaho State Veterans Home. A stroke in March cost Mann his ability to read and speak. Since then, he's made great progress, and the ability to practice reading on the Internet is "wonderful," he says. "Now I can read by using my computer."



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Additional Information

Want to write to Bobby?

Bobby Mann now has an e-mail account. Write to him at bobbymann41@yahoo.com

To help the Idaho Veterans Home?

If you want to give a donation, such as a laptop computer adapted to use Wi-Fi, or if you want to volunteer for the Veterans Home, call volunteer coordinator Phil Hawkins at 246-8750.

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The home hopes to get a few more residents connected to the wireless network within a year, Monroe said. It just depends on how many people have computers adapted to WiFi.

"It gives them another avenue to open up," Monroe says, "and at the same time keep their skills going and keep their spirits up."

As he sits on an eggplant-colored chaise, in a quiet hallway in the veterans home, Bobby visits Yahoo! Deutschland.

"You see! This is in German," the white-bearded man exclaims, peering through his salmon-colored, wire-rimmed reading glasses at his Gateway computer. "It's so exciting because I can do anything in the world with the Internet."

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